Ooh, Air Margrit

By

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'We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Margaret…' Dai Davies, lay-preacher at the cathedral, pillar of the community, stands beside the coffin in the crematorium chapel as if carved from the same Welsh oak: he rolls the Rs in Margaret and lilts in a rich, melodic baritone about my mother, a woman he's never met.

My mind rebels at the platitudes for, although I loved my mother, and I know she loved me, my relationship with her was ambiguous, even difficult at times: there was never that mother/daughter closeness between us, and the older, and more dependent, she became the more restrictive and binding were the apron strings.

I'm ashamed to say I felt relief when she died: relief at finally being free tinged with familiar guilt. She died on her eighty-seventh birthday and, though I'd taken her present-hunting only days before, I hadn't visited her on her special day.

With her death, the spectre of my own mortality drew me to dredge through family history, and I've begun to understand Mum's relationship with her own mother, Grandma's relationship with her parents, and the impact they've had on my relationship with Mum.

Northamptonshire born and bred, Grandma was a tailoress, nimble-fingered whether sewing or knitting, and nimble-tongued in the broad dialect peculiar to Kettering. If a garment needed taking in, it was 'A bit over-fully.' If she scrimped to make the most of a piece of cloth it was because, 'I ets to goo accordin.' And if she worked until the early hours to finish a suit, it was because the customer 'Ets to ev it.' Devotees of the Evening Telegraph cartoon *Air Ada* will know what I mean.

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Grandma had never had an easy life. She was the oldest of eleven children and brought up ten siblings when her mother died young: her maternal grandmother having already been found dead in a stream at Yardley Hastings, her family home. Grandma's father, Ebeneezer, Mum told me, was no help at all. He was an alcoholic wife-beater who drank his wages on a Friday night in The Woolpack unless Grandma met him at the works' gate and begged enough cash to feed his family.

According to the 1901 census, Ebeneezer was a coal-whipper, a labourer who worked in the goods yards unloading coal wagons onto carts and, after that, a stoker at the gas works in the days when coal produced town-gas: hard, filthy, sweaty jobs that drove the stoutest men to drink. Mum said he was a horrible man, but maybe the hardships of life made him that way. Although I never knew him, he is my first certain memory.

I'd crawled into the middle bedroom of Grandma's back-street terrace, where an old man lay in bed. I remember that I stood up, and we stared at each other, but no words were exchanged between us. According to his death certificate, he died when I was 22 months old.

Whatever the reasons for my great-grandfather's drinking and violence, Grandma never learned to show love or affection, or to spark the gift in her daughter.

I wonder how Ebeneezer got on with Grandad, his son-in-law. I adored my Grandad: he'd fought in the cavalry in the Great War and a sepia photo of him in uniform, on his horse, took pride of place in the front room in Regent Street. I have his army fork and the two purple-topped Cowrie shells he brought home, and a silver spoon he won showing a Dutch rabbit at Olympia in 1928. The rabbit won best in show and he was very proud of it: its name was Maurice… odd the things that stick in your mind.

I had an empathy with Grandad, as well as a shared love of horses and nature. He'd gone to war a farm boy and came back from Palestine with a wanderlust that never left him. But he'd promised Grandma that, if he survived, they'd get married and he kept his promise, took a job in the shoe factory at the end of the terrace, and moved in with Grandma and Ebeneezer.

But he'd changed, he confided: the dream he'd come home to no longer existed. The love Grandma craved was never allowed to blossom, and instead withered into a mindset of mild disapproval and a sense of shame, of failure. I can't remember one word or look of affection between them. Mum too would repel any public show of affection Dad made towards her.

How history repeats itself. How the shock-wave of emotional repression and guilt ripples outwards to touch generation after generation. Grandma suffered from depression most of her life, understandable, now I realise the disappointments with which she contended. It was a disorder that haunted my mother's mind and I see clearly, now, how she fostered in me the same feeling of responsibility for her unhappiness that her mother had fostered in her. Photographs taken between the wars show stiff figures, with sombre expressions, and served only to revive bad childhood memories for Mum. Maybe the next generation, or the next will live untrammelled by the after-effects of war, the violence of a coal-whipper and the depression of a young woman robbed of her childhood.

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Dai Davies raises his voice, bringing me back to the service I'd almost forgotten about. I notice that the owner of the care home has come, and two of Mum's are sitting by her. 'Margaret had an interesting life. She joined the WAF in 1939 and was stationed at RAF Holt in Norfolk, a county for which she retained an abiding affection. She drove the blood lorries…' Light from the stained-glass window paints the pale oak red, blue and green and kisses Dai's right hand. He's getting into his stride now, even though the crematorium service isn't a religious one.

Odd, or maybe not so odd, that Mum couldn't… hadn't been able to stand the sight of blood. Dad's war service consisted of working as an electrician at Stewarts and Lloyds, the steel works at Corby. He and Mum had met through their respective brothers, who were close friends. Mum told me that when she took Dad home to meet her parents, Grandma's disapproving comment was, 'Ooh, air Margrit, couldn't yu ev done better en *that*?' True, Dad was small and wiry, balding, with a hook nose, a scar the length of his forehead, and was blind in one eye due to an altercation between a wooden trolley and a two-ton truck at the age of eight… which was why he escaped being called-up… but, well, Grandma spoke as she found.

She died just before my first son was born and I always regret that she didn't get to meet him. She and Dad never really got on. Dad was a quick, impatient man, and Grandma not the brightest candle in the room, though she loved a game of cards, or a bet on the horses and a gin and tonic… She once won seventy-five pounds on the football pools and made a pot of tea with no tea in it, she was so excited. I find myself getting more and more like her as I get older, though my speciality is standing in the middle of the kitchen wondering what I went there for.

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After their marriage, Mum and Dad moved in with Grandma, Granddad and Ebeneezer, and lived there until I was a year old, and my brother was four. Seven people and four generations in a three-bedroom terrace with only an outside 'lavvy' and one cold tap in the kitchen. Is it any wonder they bottled their feelings and there were few outward displays of affection? Is it any wonder Mum became a target for Grandma's discontent and 'ooh, air Margrit a frequent rebuff?

Dad died 21 years ago, only eighteen months after he and Mum followed my second husband and me from Northamptonshire to Pembrokeshire. I'd escaped… briefly… from the uneasy cords

that bound me to my mother. What is it they say, *a woman is a daughter first, a mother second, and a wife third.* It was a constant juggling act with those three clubs, hands constantly slippery with guilt feeling I failed at all three.

Dad had prostate cancer and the hospital sent him home to die. The nurses, who visited daily, were fantastic and our family doctor spent the whole of Christmas Day with us: he died peacefully at ten minutes to midnight on Christmas night. 'I know your mother can be difficult,' he'd said. 'It hasn't always been easy, but I love her. Look after her for me.'

'I will, Dad. I promise.' I did my best… Did I? Did I, really? I put her in a home when she lost her sight, became wheelchair-bound, and demanded more time and love than I could give her. I could have given juggling preference to her club and gone to see her on her birthday.

'Margaret loved her garden, and nature.' Dai's gentle purring voice lulls me back form my guilty past. 'She bred Swallowtail butterflies which she released on Wicken Fen in Norfolk…'

My eyes are drawn again to the polished oak coffin with its shining brass handles. Soon the curtain will draw across in front of it and Mum will be gone forever, her ashes floating free on the air like her beautiful butterflies. Her great-grandchildren, although doubtless bored, are behaving themselves remarkably well. There's some shuffling of feet and rustling of paper from the younger members of the congregation, and some asthmatic breathing and the odd cough from the older generation, but otherwise Dai holds his audience wrapt.

Ken the Box, the undertaker recommended by the care home, sent Dai to speak to me soon after Mum's death. He arranged the order of service at the crematorium, and for Mum's ashes to be interred with Dad's, in the windswept churchyard on the hill above Solva, overlooking the sea. He asked me about Mum's life, what she was like, so he could say something about her at the funeral. We got chatting… Dai was a man with a twinkle in his eye and a wicked sense of humour. He laughed a deep belly-laugh as he related the tale of the man who'd insisted his parrot attended his funeral. Halfway through the service the parrot had piped up. 'Fuck off. Fuck off.'

His irrepressible humour relaxed me and drew me out: we got onto the subject of family history and I told him I was researching mine. Black sheep, rumours of whom had always intrigued me but which Grandma had kept firmly hidden beneath a frown of respectability, leapt imaginary hurdles to freedom. A great-great-great aunt had been the 'bad girl' of Warkton village and was deported to Australia. A great-great-great uncle and his two cousins had been convicted of killing a gamekeeper in Yardley Chase. None would admit to murder, or finger either of the others, so, rather than being hung, they'd found themselves on a prison hulk in Portsmouth harbour before setting sail on the convict ship HMS Tortoise, bound for Hobart, Tasmania, in 1841.

And then there was Aunt Ellen, I went on, warming to my subject. She was Grandma's younger sister, who'd run a tailor's shop in Glasgow, lost her only son in the Second World War and lived in a tenement in the Gorbels. As children, we took bets on what colour her hair would be when she visited. I can definitely remember blue, orange, red, green and purple, and once a mixture. We kids loved her, but Grandma said she was a kleptomaniac and you couldn't take her anywhere: she'd even come out of a restaurant with half the cutlery shoved up her sleeves. Pressed for more of Aunt Nell's misdemeanours, Grandma had clamped her lips disapprovingly shut. On reflection, I'm surprised she'd admitted as much as she did.

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Dai pauses for breath, head bowed respectfully, as Mark Knopfler plays guitar with wordless eloquence. I glance across at my older brother, who lost his partner not long ago: she and Mum shared a birthday and today will be hard for him. Then there's my uncle, my father's younger brother, who's in his 80s and now the last of his generation. My sons and their families are behind

us, and behind them Mum's brother's children and their partners. Family, some I haven't seen for years, have travelled from Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Kent, France and Germany to be here to honour Mum's life.

I catch my cousin Libby's eye as Theme to a Local Hero plays quietly, and she smiles comfortingly. I last saw her at her wedding almost twenty years ago. It was a lovely service, held in a Catholic church in the woods somewhere near Trier, Germany. The English contingent was small compared to the groom's side of the family, but we did our best to follow a ceremony that was entirely in German. We did sing one English hymn, somewhat feebly, and our minds eagerly latched onto the odd German word that sounded marginally English. It was all going fine until the priest said, 'Jesus farted.'

At least, that's what it sounded like to English ears. In front of me, rows of shoulders heaved with suppressed mirth. I suspect those behind me heaved as well. Like the bride, I daren't turn round to look: catching someone's eye would have been disastrous. She, too, knew exactly what her family and friends were thinking.

Dai clears his throat and looks directly at me: I straighten my face as the wedding darkens into a funeral: white to black. 'Margaret came from a good family.' The timbre of his voice commands our full attention, with his majestic rolling of his Rs and his lyrical Welsh accent. His eyes move to the assembled mourners and he smiles broadly, benignly, embracing us all in his appraisal. 'Of murderers, thieves and prostitutes.'

The silence behind me deepens until a vast pit opens and swallows all sound, all asthmatic breath, all rustling paper, all shuffling feet. Time hangs suspended, and into that silence, as I will the floor to swallow me whole, my late grandmother voices her final disapproval, her final humiliation and shame, though for once she targets the wrong sinner. 'Ooh, air Margrit!'